The problem of how to integrate and assimilate diverse racial and linguistic groups, often peoples recently conquered or displaced, has historically been a major concern for complex polities. It has given rise to a range of policies: ethnic cleansing, mass enslavement, and efforts at imposing legal and religious conformity, but also appeasement and semi-autonomy in combination with situational identities and fluid group boundaries. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a number of new factors complicated this story. They included: 1) the post-Enlightenment commitment among states to rational, efficient and centralized control of communities; 2) the tension between the postulate that all full members of a polity were to be considered equal in their relations with officials, and a perhaps increasing belief in a hierarchy of cultures or races; 3) new efforts to ‘unite’ empires by enforcing a common language, culture and, sometimes, religion or ethnic identity; 4) the rise of nationalist or independence movements, often along ethno-religious lines; 5) massive economic expansion accompanied by new or more coercive forms of labor exploitation, including, in the New World, the intensification of slavery; 6) the emergence of new and powerful secular ideologies (most notably, socialism).

The first of this series of two panels looks at the American empire in the nineteenth century, as the United States pushed west and southward across formerly Native American, Spanish and French lands. This expansion, greatly reinforced by capitalist growth, served as a critical avenue for the intensification and metastasis of the ‘peculiar institution’ of slavery within the borders of the United States. Westward expansion also provided an opportunity for the federal government to forcibly relocate Native American people (some of whom themselves owned slaves of African descent), both in order to reinforce the hierarchical construction of racialized identities, and to further policies of selective segregation and assimilation. The second panel looks at three Central and Eastern European multiethnic empires, the Habsburg monarchy, Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It examines the use of the census (people-counting) to quantify, categorize and control diverse populations, and the ways these populations resisted (or exploited) the assumptions and ideologies of centralized bureaucracies, often by attempting to forge their own notions of identity. It also assesses how the notionally universalist ideology of socialism created or rejected ideas of group identity during the occupation of East Central Europe in the early stages of the Second World War.

It is hoped that these panels together will illuminate the many ways modernizing imperial states interact with, shape and are shaped by racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse populations.